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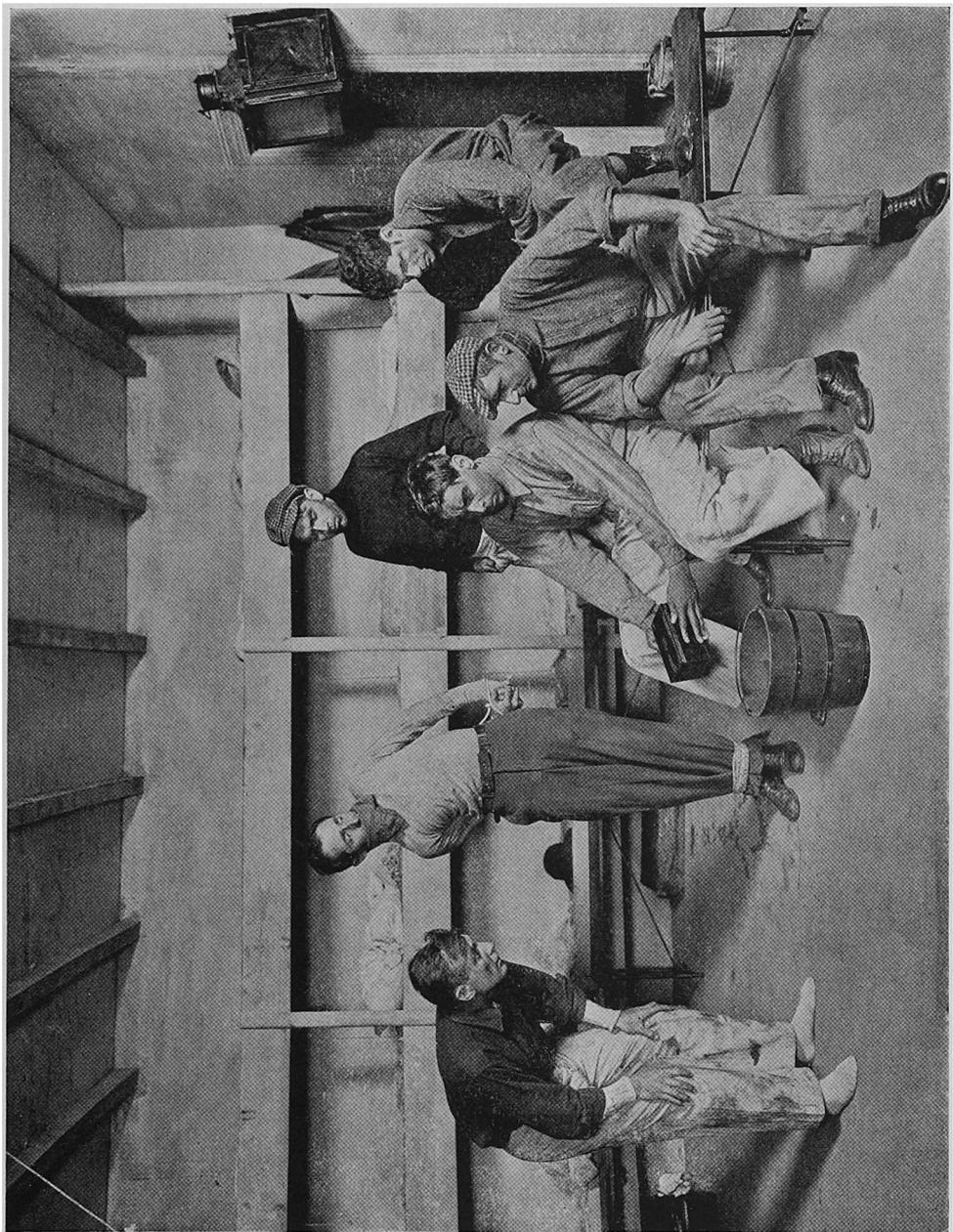
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In some of its productions, the Little Theatre follows closely in the wake of the news. In the forecastle of a munition ship a bomb suspect is being seized. From "In the Zone" by the Washington Square Players.

THE REVOLT IN THE THEATRE

BY HENRY McDONALD SPENCER

OF late years there has been a breaking away from academic tradition in the fine arts, that has been synchronous with the political revolts and general dissatisfaction with the old ideals in science, morals and religion. Painting, poetry, music and sculpture show evidence of "neo" movements; and the art of the theatre, regarded by some as a combination of acting and other arts, by others as a distinct, homogeneous art—the art of showmanship—provides no exception to this repudiation of accepted standards.

There is, however, a sharply defined difference between theatric art and the other mediums of aesthetic expression, in that the theatre is primarily a commercial enterprise. It is true that a poet is, in a sense, both a manufacturer and a jobber, as well as an artist—in like case are the painter, sculptor, and musician—but the poet's "overhead" is comparatively small, consisting principally of his own living expenses.

On the other hand a play is something performed on a stage by actors before an audience, and therefore it must make, in ordinary circumstances, a fairly general appeal in order to receive that support without which it cannot exist. The other arts may be considered quite apart from their financial returns, and solely from the standpoint of the artist's aesthetic purpose, but the drama does not live until it receives outside maintenance. Such maintenance is not a reward, or a recognition of the artist, but a condition of being.

The commercial aspect of the theatre vastly complicates the artistic problem, and this complication has resulted in much confusion and running around in circles. The extreme idealists blame the managers, the latter blame the audiences, and the actors blame everybody excepting themselves. It may be observed that there are three phases of theatric insurgence—one directed towards the drama itself; another towards the theatre as a social institution; the third demands a reform in the methods of production.

The plays are charged with being banal, insincere reactions to the theatre rather than to life; stagnant, failing to keep up with current thought, lacking in ideas; with being the work of mere journeymen rather than of artists. And on the social side, it is held that the theatre is not adjusted to the demands of the people who feed it. It is maintained by the sociologists that the theatre should serve a social end, develop a local spirit, give voice to unexpressed feelings, and "fill a gap in a line of institutions somewhere with the church, the school and the jail."*

On the professional side it is charged that the theatre costs too much, and makes an entirely inadequate return for the money and time expended. That it fails properly to maintain its artists, rendering their existence precarious, and that it is subversive of originality and creative effort.

Indeed, it is evidence of the vitality of

**The Insurgent Theatre*, by Thomas W. Dickinson, B. W. Huebsch, New York.

the theatre as an institution that it survives at all the barrage fire directed from without, and the bombing by "enemies within."

In speaking of the theatre one refers nowadays not only to the building and the performances but to the technical, artistic, business and social activities and relations of a vast institution of public entertainment. Its mere comprehensiveness is evidence of the extraordinary difficulties involved in accomplishing any substantial reform; also of the impossibility of adequately reviewing all of its aspects within a limited space. Without support there can be no play, and the dramatist requires the playhouse if his drama is to be produced at all, therefore it is the theatre management and its methods, and the audience, to which one must turn for the practical side of reform. And before condemning in pontifical phrases the much berated commercial manager, let us first consider the audience from whom he, as well as the playwright and other artists of the theatre, must draw support.

II.

One of the first difficulties with which we are confronted is the fact that, generally speaking, a play must receive substantial support from an audience drawn, more or less at random, from the great mass of the people. The enlightened classes of the community are too small in numbers to maintain the drama in the ordinary conditions of the theatre. To produce plays which all classes will like immediately, while perhaps not impossible, is as unlikely as it would be to write a book or paint a picture which would receive instantly universal favor. Imagine Pater being read with interest by lovers of Pollyanna, or Conrad and Harold Bell Wright being acclaimed by the one and the same class of mind.

What then is the taste of the average man?

The moving pictures supply us with pretty fair evidence of what the public as a whole really likes. The most popular pictures are those displaying the immature inanities of Mary Pickford, the epileptic antics of Charlie Chaplin and the provocative posturings of a Theda Bara or other vitagraphic vampire. As further evidences of opinions of the many it may be observed that the great majority of our countrymen think that Robert W. Chambers is our greatest novelist; Howard Chandler Christy our leading painter; Maude Adams the greatest actress; "Ben Hur" was the greatest play of the last twenty years; Belasco our greatest producer; "Peg O' My Heart," our greatest sentimental comedy; Dr. Frank Crane our greatest essayist, and the late Elbert Hubbard our greatest philosopher. Moreover, there was, until recently at least, a deep-rooted conviction that all French people were immoral; that passing under a ladder meant bad luck; that the war was brought on by effete monarchs to provide outdoor sport for an enfeebled aristocracy.

It is, therefore, to an audience composed to a great extent of persons with these beliefs and preferences that the theatre must look for support, not only financial, but the mental support without which the fountains of inspiration ultimately will run dry, and which is particularly necessary in the theatre.

Professor Dickinson divides the audience into four classes: The Puritans; Regular theatre-goers who are indifferent to the kind of entertainment and who regard it purely as pastime; Connoisseurs, the so-called high-brows, who go principally to find fault; Theatre-lovers, who go to the theatre to enjoy and not to judge it.

Roughly speaking, an average Broadway

theatre requires about \$7,000 a week as a minimum intake to pay expenses. Two-thirds of this sum is taken up in rental and advertising and the remainder is allotted for salaries, royalty and other expenses of production.

Therefore, anyone wishing to produce intelligent plays in the regular theatres of New York must face an audience in the first place which is thoroughly commonplace, if not depraved, in its taste; an audience which is heterogeneous, insincere, disorganized and indifferent. He faces a scale of expense which does not change except to mount ever higher; while his support is at all times subject to dwindling rather than to increase, as the early curiosity and novelty seekers are satisfied. The business is largely speculative and the shrewdest business brains in America frequently have guessed wrong.

III.

Quite fittingly, the first uprising against theatric tyranny came from within, especially from the actors who felt that they were being hampered or stultified by the existing conditions. But at best this movement resulted principally in the production of a few Shakespearean plays and the introduction to the American stage of a number of the works of the new men who were the leaders of the intellectual drama on the Continent. These productions were made principally at the expense of the producer either in money, or in previous popularity which carried the plays along for some time. The movement was spasmodic and did not produce any definite result. In fact, the theatre as we have been considering it was left unchanged; and the innovators footed the deficits.

The next experiment made to reform the theatre was the subsidy system. According to Professor Dickinson,

It has failed because it has depended upon the power of money to do what needed to be done by other means, because it is palliative rather than fundamental in its efforts, because it has served to perpetuate a system that was subversive and expensive and because it has tried to impose upon theatre-goers under the guise of art and at the appeal of duty a kind of play they did not want and would not accept.

The classic example of the failure of the subsidy system in America is the New Theatre in New York, an example so full of lessons as to have been worth the money it cost.

The New Theatre used its subsidy to perpetuate the faults of the commercial theatre. True, it introduced repertory, it eliminated stars, it produced new plays. But in so far as the American theatre is the victim of overfeeding it magnified the disease and offered no cure. It accepted all the faults of the commercial theatre, the high salaries, the tremendous property investments, and tried to cure them by superfluity. One purpose the New Theatre served well. It showed that no amount of money can accomplish what must come in the form of a change of impulse, that the stimulus of investment must give away to the stimulus of creation, that reform will not come from overplus but from reduction to the necessary factors. Much of the vogue of the simpler methods of production, the smaller and more modest principles of staging and popular appeal, followed immediately upon the failure of the New Theatre.

Then came the idea of subsidising the idea through spending the money on productions rather than on the erection of a building. This plan was put into operation in Chicago and elsewhere, and although it included in one instance the services of Donald Robertson, a man of great force and sympathy, and of a thorough understanding of the theatre, it, too, failed of sufficient support. It was then realized that money was not all, and though financial assistance ever has been useful, repeated experiments have shown that before money can be expended to advantage there must be an intelligent and sympathetic audience that will lend its aid and co-operation.

Another movement then came from within, and was again palliative rather than remedial. The Drama League of America, founded in Evanston, Illinois, was the first of these organizations to

federate the audiences. But its weakness also was fundamental as it merely substituted the opinion of a committee for the opinion of a manager. All of the defects of the theatre system remained as before. One advance, however, was made by the Drama League and the Drama Society of New York: They led the audience into a consciousness of its power and responsibilities and set in motion a stream of activity and discussion in relation to the drama. They helped to stimulate the American public out of the *laissez faire* attitude into which it had sunk in relation to the theatre.

IV.

THE LITTLE THEATRES

Although we had a Theatre of Arts and Letters as far back as 1892, nothing came of it, but in the beginning of the century the influence of the independent theatre movements of Europe began to be felt in America. It was not, however, until the company of Irish Players came in 1911 that the ideals on which the Little Theatres were founded became measurably accepted. A number of dramatic clubs, college and other amateur societies had been experimenting in a small way, but a dearth of plays and of theatric talent kept them back from doing anything of consequence in reforming the theatre.

The Little Theatres represent the present stage of theatre reform, and while it is true they have not had much effect as yet on the conventional type of theatre, yet they afford a vastly superior form of entertainment for enlightened audiences, and they have opened an outlet for artistic impulse which otherwise would have been stifled. Furthermore, they have shown the way in regard to the curtailment of expense.

The question, "Exactly what is a Little

Theatre?" is answered by Professor Dickinson by reference to the activities of the last five years:

Judging from these it may be said that the little theatre is four things. It is a building; it is a principle of economical management; it is a cooperative guild of artists of the theatre; and it is a system of alliance with the federated audience. Properly, it is a combination of all of these things.

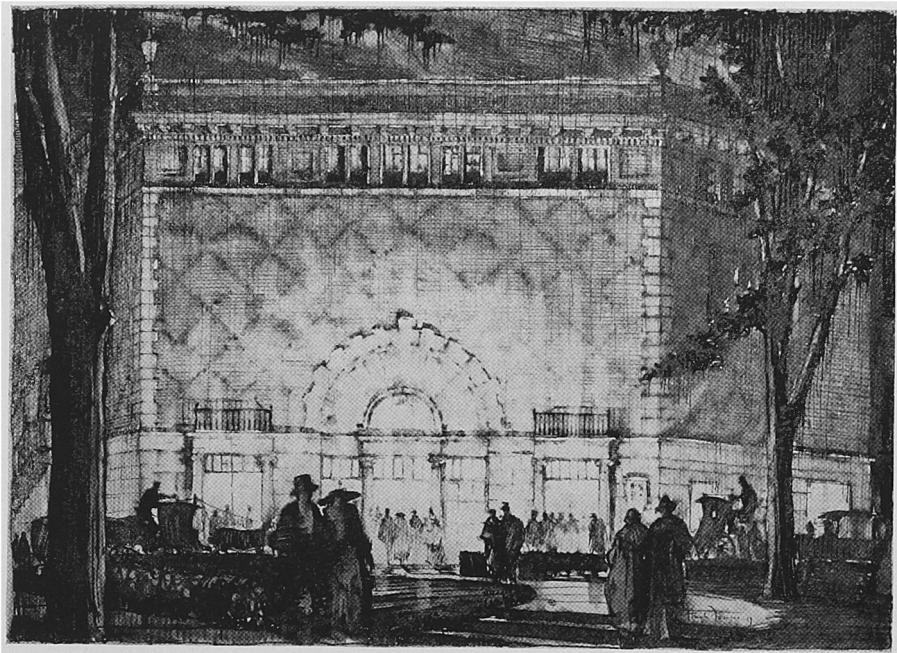
The little theatre is first of all a small building for plays given in an intimate way. It usually contains fewer than three hundred seats, the number in some places set by law as the figure upon which building requirements are stipulated.

Did the term little theatre refer only to seating capacity all small theatres without distinction would belong to the class. But little theatre means more than this. It is a building which is run in a particular way and for a particular purpose. It belongs to the class of little theatre only to the extent that it satisfies these other conditions. The little theatre is run upon the theory of absolute economy of management. Someone has called it a "complete theatre reduced from average dimensions." This reduction extends to all the factors of the theatre, the size of the audience, the number of performances, the code of production, the size of plays, and the budget sheet. The little theatre depends upon the reduction of all the factors of a production to the lowest terms.

The third means of identification of the Little Theatre is thus explained:

The little theatre is a guild of artists. What is meant by this? We have seen that the commercial theatre labors under certain disadvantages. Both on the side of the money features of the theatre and on the side of its artistic functions the commercial theatre is full of pitfalls and discouragements. And yet it is found that anyone who tries to improve either one of these features in the commercial theatre has his way blocked by the very forces which he is attempting to correct. The conclusion is that the only way to do it is to do it from without. The little theatre is a means of solving both these problems, the problems of expense and the problems of art. It attacks them separately, but so closely do they hang together that their solution is mutual. The little theatre exchanges for the impulse to work which comes from the promise of reward the impulse that comes from the possibility of labor in pleasurable enterprises.

There remains the fourth characteristic of the little theatre. I have said it is a system of alliance with the audience. The little theatre depends upon the minimum support of an intelligent audience. At the start it does not need a large audience. It lays its pattern closely by the cloth before it is cut. It binds the audience to itself by subscriptions and guarantees. It identifies itself with the audience, sometimes even drawing its workers from among the audience. Not least among the achievements



THE GREENWICH VILLAGE THEATRE

The latest Little Theatre to open its doors in New York gave promise in its first bill of fulfilling the high purpose to which it was dedicated



Scene II from "Behind a Watteau Picture," by Robert E. Rogers, one of the opening plays at the Greenwich Village Theatre

of the little theatres has been the fact that they have federated the audiences for particular purposes, that they have given solidity and direction to the interests of those who were anxious for a new dramatic fare.

And as word of warning we are told that:

If the little theatre forgets the important thing and searches merely for the novel and the strange then it is failing in its task. The one-act play has been an excellent expedient for the little theatre. It has been easy to write and easy to produce. In introducing it the little theatre has rendered some service to the stage. But if it begins to offer the one-act play as the only form of stage art then too it is setting itself apart from the rational laws of growth.

The point is that the little theatres have been an expedient, filling an excellent place in a transition state of the theatre. They have provided the means by which all the necessary new factors of the theatre could come together in concert. Artists, actors, painters, producers, organizers and audience have been brought together for the service of a new art for the theatre. Behind this the avowed purposes, the encouragement and support of an American drama, the giving voice and tongue to a neighborhood, the production of the

great masterpieces of the world, the elevation of the taste of the community, the improvement of the canons of production and of acting, the creation of an audience, sink away into the oblivion that comes to professions under the records of deeds. The real forces that pressed the workers on were the urge to do the plays they felt impelled to produce, to do them by the codes their own artistic sense said was right, under methods of co-operation that fed rather than starved the spirit and with the understanding support even if of a few.

Throughout the entire country there are about 50 Little Theatres, with a seating capacity of not over 15,000 in all, therefore it is evident that the influence of the Little Theatre on the Drama as an institution is educational and exemplary rather than revolutionary. In the meantime those who come under its influence will demand better things from the ordinary commercial playhouse, and the greater this demand becomes the better able the managers will be to satisfy it.

A DEEP-SWORN VOW

By W. B. YEATS

Others, because you did not keep
That deep-sworn vow, have been friends of mine;
Yet always when I look death in the face,
When I clamber to the heights of sleep,
Or when I grow excited with wine,
Suddenly I meet your face.

—*The Sphere, London*